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Senate VIETNAM TRADE ACT

Mr. CARPER. Madam President, I rise today in strong support of the resolution that is before us.

The first time I saw Vietnam was from a P-3 naval aircraft about 31 years ago this year. Twenty-one years would actually pass from that time before I set foot on Vietnamese soil. Many times in the early 1970s my aircrew and I flew over Vietnam, around Vietnam, and landed in bases in that region. I never set foot on Vietnamese soil until 1991.

At that time, I was a Member of the House of Representatives and led a congressional delegation that included five other United States Representatives, all of whom served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war. We went at a time when many believed that U.S. soldiers, sailors, and airmen were being held--after the end of the war--in prison camps. We went there to find out the truth as best we could.

What we encountered, to our surprise, was a welcoming nation. We visited not only Vietnam but Cambodia and Laos. In Vietnam, we found, to our surprise, a welcoming nation. Most of the people who live in Vietnam are people who were born since 1975, since the Government of South Vietnam fell to the North.

For the most part--not everyone--but for the most part, they like Americans, admire Americans, and want to have normal relations with our country.

Our delegation also included U.S. Congressman Pete Peterson from Florida. Our delegation took with us, to those three

nations, a roadmap, a roadmap that could lead to normalized relations between the United States and, particularly, Vietnam.

Our offer was that if the Vietnamese would take certain steps, particularly with respect to providing information in allowing us access to information about our missing in action, we would reciprocate and take other steps as well.

We laid out the roadmap. We assured the Vietnamese that if they were to do certain things, we would not move the goalposts but we would reciprocate. They did those certain things, and we reciprocated. In 1994, former President Clinton lifted the trade embargo between our two countries.

Think back. It has been 50 years, this year, since the United States has had normal trade relations with Vietnam--50 years. In 1994, the embargo, which had been in place for a number of years, was lifted.

I had the opportunity to go back to Vietnam a few years ago as Governor of Delaware. I led a trade delegation to that country. What I saw in 1999 surprised me just as much as being surprised when we were welcomed in 1991.

I will never forget driving from the airport to downtown Hanoi and being struck by the number of small businesses that had cropped up on either side of the highway that we traversed. It was a fairly long drive, and everywhere we looked small businesses had popped up to provide a variety of services and goods to the people.

The Government leaders with whom we met talked about free enterprise. They talked

about how the marketplace, and finding ways to use the marketplace, might allow them to better meet the needs of their citizens, how it would enable them to become a more important trading partner in that part of the world, and for them to be a nation with less poverty and with greater opportunities for their own citizens.

Vietnam today is either the 12th or 13th most populous nation in the world. Some 80 million people live there. There are a number of reasons why I believe this resolution is in our interest, and I will get into those reasons in a moment, but I want to take a moment and read the actual text of this resolution. It is not very long. It says:

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That the Congress approves the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment with respect to the products of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam transmitted by the President to the Congress on June 8, 2001.

Negotiations on the bilateral trade agreement before us began in 1996 or 1997. We have been at this for almost 5 years. It was negotiated by Pete Peterson who became our Ambassador and was part of our congressional delegation 10 years ago. Pete did a wonderful job as Ambassador, and I give him a lot of credit for having hammered out the provisions of this bilateral trade agreement.

The agreement was concluded a year ago in an earlier administration and has been sent to us by President Bush for our consideration. There are a number of reasons that former President Clinton and his administration thought this was a good idea for America. There are a number of similar reasons that President Bush and his administration believe this agreement is a good one for America.

First, it acknowledges that Vietnam is a big country, a populous country, and one

that is going to play an ever more important role in that part of the world and in the world. It has 80 million people, mostly under the age of 30, for the most part people who like us, admire us, who want to have a good relationship with the United States despite our very troubled relations over the last half century.

Those markets that now exist in Vietnam have not been especially open to us. Sure, we have had the ability to sell over the years more and more goods and services, including a fair amount of high-technology equipment and goods. They now sell a number of items to us. We buy those. But they have in place barriers to our exports, and we have barriers to their exports. We will create jobs in this country, and they will create jobs in their country, if we will lift the import restrictions here and there, reduce the quotas dramatically and the tariffs. This provision does that, not just for them but for us. To the extent that we can sell more goods and services there, we benefit as a nation, and we will.

A number of countries in that part of the world do not respect intellectual property rights. Vietnam is not among the worst offenders in that regard. But there are problems in this respect. This agreement will take us a lot closer to where we need to be in protecting intellectual property rights, not just of Americans but of others around the world.

On my last visit to Vietnam, in the meetings we had with their business and government leaders, we talked a lot about transparency and how difficult it was for those who would like to invest in Vietnam, do business in Vietnam, to go through their bureaucracy. Their bureaucrats make ours look like pikers. They are world class in terms of throwing up roadblocks and making things difficult for investment to occur. This agreement won't totally end that, but it will sure go a long way toward permitting the

kind of investments American companies want to make and ought to be able to make in Vietnam and, similarly, to reciprocate and provide their business people, their companies, the opportunity to invest in the United States.

There is something to be said for regional stability as well. Vietnam can contribute to regional stability if their economy strengthens and they move toward a more free market system. Or they can be a contributor to destabilization. This agreement will better ensure they are a more stable country and able to promote stability within the region.

Others have raised concerns today about alleged continuing abuses in human rights and the denial of freedom of religion, insufficient progress toward democratization. There is more than a grain of truth to some of that. Religious leaders are not given the kinds of freedoms that our leaders have. The Vatican declared last year that as far as they are concerned, freedom to worship is no longer a problem in Vietnam. They open kindergartens now and they teach the catechisms as much as they are taught here in Catholic-sponsored kindergartens. When I was there in 1991, they still had reeducation camps. They no longer have those. They have been replaced for the most part by drug rehabilitation facilities.

Much has been made today of the reaction of the Vietnamese to the horrors here 22 days ago, September 11. The truth is, the Vietnamese press has been overwhelmingly sympathetic to the American people and to those who lost loved ones on September 11. Their government leaders provided, literally within days, a letter of deep condolences to our President to express their abhorrence for what happened in our Nation.

With respect to terrorism, if anything, Ambassador Peterson shares with me that they have been helpful to us in working on

terrorist activities and providing not only information that is valuable to us but giving us the opportunity to reciprocate. He suggests they may have actually been a better partner at this transfer of information than we have.

Finally, the freedom to emigrate. I recall 10 years ago there were difficulties people encountered trying to emigrate to this country or other countries from Vietnam. Today, for the most part, passports are easily obtained. If a person wants to go to Australia, to the Philippines, to the United States, if they don't have criminal records or other such problems in their portfolio, they are able to get those passports and travel.

Let me conclude with this thought: I think in my lifetime, the defining issue for my generation, certainly one of the defining issues, has been our animosity toward Vietnam, the war we fought with Vietnam, a war which tore our country apart. That war officially ended 26 years ago. A long healing process has been underway since then in Vietnam and also in this country.

We have come a long way in that relationship over the last 26 years. So have the Vietnamese. We have the potential today to take that last step in normalizing relations, and that is a step we ought to take.

Vietnam today is no true democracy. They still have their share of problems. So do we, and so does the rest of the world. But I am convinced that if we adopt this resolution and agree to this bilateral trade agreement, it will move Vietnam a lot further and a lot faster down the road to a true free enterprise system. With those economic freedoms will come, more surely and more quickly, the kind of political freedoms we value and would want for their people just as much we cherish for our people.

With those thoughts in mind, I conclude by saying to our old colleague--the Presiding Officer also served with Congressman

Peterson--later the first United States Ambassador to Vietnam: I will never forget when I visited him a year or two ago on our trade mission, he and his wife Vi were good enough to host a dinner for our delegation at the residence of the Ambassador. And as we drove to the Embassy the next day, we drove by the old Hanoi Hotel. The idea that an American flier who had spent 6 and a half years as a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hotel would return 25, 30 years later to be

America's first Ambassador to that country in half a century, the idea that that kind of transformation could occur was moving to me then, and it is today.

There is another kind of transformation that has occurred in our relationship with Vietnam and within Vietnam as well, a good transformation, a positive transformation, one that we can reaffirm and strengthen by a positive vote today.